

## **FCPA 11 December 2017 Public Meeting, “Public Input on Drones on Parkland”**

Commentary by John Roach

After introductions, **Ryan Stewart**, Park Planning Branch of FCPA, described what the county is doing to find additional places for the public to fly drones on parkland. The flight restricted zone surrounding Reagan National Airport limits possible choices. Lake Fairfax and Popes Head Parks lie outside this zone. What the county said as well as their **November 2017 study, Unmanned Aircraft Systems in Fairfax County Parks**, is available on the Fairfax County website. Their 41 page study is worth reading. My commentary draws on the notes I took at the meeting.

**Paul Lukas**, representing NVRC, was first public speaker. He suggested line of sight flying (LOS) or LOS spotters for FPV and AMA guidelines as a basis for safe flying.

**Bob Lamond** spoke for the Drone Users Group (DUG). His organization admonishes its members to never fly in a careless or reckless manner, not to overfly people, and to remain a minimum safe distance of 25 feet away from people and objects. He closed by saying that DUG members want to be good neighbors.

**Chris Brown** suggested the key to the initiative was a reasonable rule based system. Nothing has zero risk – baseballs may strike a spectator, but we control the risk baseball presents to minimize it. He proposed a comparable argument for drones.

**Jim Hickey** spoke for Friends of Lake Accotink Park (FLAP). He said that he had serious concerns for the safety of birds in parks if drones are allowed to fly in parks.

**John Roach** pointed out that drones crash, which is why they must remain within a designated flying area. Pilot error is principal reason for crashes, which is why operators must be trained and certified. Drone operators must be held accountable for an infraction of field rules or violation of safety or privacy laws. He suggested pilots sign in and out of a flying area and proposed the county charge pilots a user fee to pay for liability and staffing costs. He stated that the limited view of a drone camera made LOS flying or LOS spotters to assist pilots necessary. Limiting the size and speed of drones as well as the number of drones flying at any time would improve flight safety. His last suggestions were to limit public access to flying areas with barriers, signage and rules and to inform the public where drones may fly with signs and on the county website.

**Tony Cacolachi** reported that he was concerned about public safety. He said that people would not drive to the other side of the county to fly a drone. He suggested that we needed to make [drone flying anywhere] as safe as possible through education.

**Carl** represented Audubon. He reported an observation that the heart rate of bears increased when drones flew near them and concluded that [drones] negatively upset birds. He feels that the FCPA may lack the resources to oversee drones in parks.

**Eric Gever** spoke as a member of both NVRC and DC DUG. He presented the best pitch of the night for ways to use drones to get students interested in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math). Basically, he has been there and done that in California and now hopes to recreate that program in Virginia schools.

**Larry Hoss** spoke as a county resident living next to Popes Head Park. He is opposed to the county permitting drones to fly within the park. They already fly there [without permission] and are raising safety and privacy concerns among nearby residents.

**Lisa Mulvill** spoke as a neighbor of Lake Fairfax. She opposes opening the park to drones as a matter of privacy and the possibility of drones interfering with bald eagle nesting. She suggested the county look for a more secluded, bigger area as a site.

**Jim Cullen** lives next to Popes Head Park. He reported that there is a lack of enforcement and drones fly over homes. No one would be out there to enforce [flight rules] if we open it to drones. He also said he has worked on drones for 20 years.

**Michael Van Buren** described himself as a drone enthusiast, just flying over parks rather than flying over private property.

**Walter Atlantis** described his fear of drones. He lives next to Popes Head Park. Privacy would be a joke. It is an inappropriate location. A flying site should have a minimum area of 100 acres. The Park Authority has parks, but there are other places to fly that are not parks.

**Betty Cullen** is a teacher who lives near Popes Head Park. She advised everyone that there will be problems with illegal trash, etc. One of 2 proposed flying areas in the park is bounded by a tot play area. This is not safe. It is a very tiny park. Find a larger park.

**Cindy Cohen** reported that she sees aircraft fly in Popes Head Park all the time and expressed privacy and safety concerns.

The meeting was then opened to additional public comment. A member of the audience couched his concerns as an assumption that the county would rely on a drone operator to comply with the rules. He then asked, "What prevents a pilot from flying over the nearby parkway?" This prompted additional objections based on privacy concerns.

**Ryan Stewart** replied that FCPA could only control takeoff and landing in the park. **Paul Lukas** added that there were existing applicable safety and privacy laws. **Ryan** referred to a summary of applicable Virginia laws and then replied that 18.2-130.1 made peeping or spying into a dwelling or an occupied building a Class 1 misdemeanor.